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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BELGRADE 000050

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SUBJECT: SERBIAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Upcoming Serbian presidential elections pit the incumbent President Boris Tadic against Radical Party Tomislav Nikolic in a race that Tadic will likely win in the second round of voting. The Radicals are running an effective campaign, however, presenting a kinder, gentler message that may capture support beyond the Radicals' core. In general, the race has not yet captured the attention of the electorate. To secure a second term, Tadic must mobilize his supporters -- greater in number, but traditionally less likely to vote than his opponent. End Summary.

CANDIDATES CAMPAIGN VIGOROUSLY, PUBLIC YAWNS

2. (U) Nine candidates are running in Serbia's January 20 presidential elections. All analysts expect incumbent Boris Tadic (Democratic Party -- DS) and Tomislav Nikolic (Serbian Radical Party -- SRS) to finish as the top two candidates, with neither garnering the majority necessary for a first-round win. Pollsters expect democratic parties will rally around the DS for a Tadic victory in the February 3 run-off. Strategic Marketing polling, conducted with the support of the International Republic Institute (IRI), showed Nikolic beating Tadic 39% to 38% in the first round, and declared Tadic support at 42% to Nikolic's 34% in the second round, but the 24% who remain undecided or unwilling to declare their candidate leaves the outcome very uncertain. In recent elections, the SRS has succeeded in turning out a higher percentage -- as high as 80% -- of its supporters than the DS and other democratic bloc parties.

3. (U) Despite billboards plastering the capital and candidates' rallies dominating evening television broadcasts, the public shows little interest in the elections. According to Srbobran Brankovic, who heads the Medium-Gallup polling firm, the election is occurring at a time of "extreme dissatisfaction by the electorate." Recent questioning on the part of the prime minister about whether Serbia should proceed with EU integration has "confused" the pro-Europe bloc of the Brankovic said, raising doubts about whether they should vote at all, he said. Some Serbian contacts have even commented to emboffs that they are more interested in U.S. elections than their own.

RADICALS: SELLING A SOFTER IMAGE; DRAWING CROWDS AND (LIKELY) VOTERS

4. (SBU) The Radical Party (SRS) is running a more visible and active campaign than the Democrats, presenting a softer image that might appeal to voters beyond the party's core. Under the slogan "All Heart" Nikolic smiles down from billboards and appears with his

young grandson in TV spots. Nikolic has stopped wearing his party badge showing Vojislav Seselj, the head of the Radical Party, currently on trial for war crimes in The Hague. Nikolic told the press that he decided to forego the badge to attract voters who did not like Seselj but otherwise supported the party's message. On January 8, Nikolic assured voters that his election would neither "topple" the current government nor would his party support waging war if Kosovo declares independence. Serbia should "cut all economic ties" with Kosovo, Nikolic said, but "we will not send our children to war."

15. (SBU) Analysts generally agree that the Radicals' campaign is effective. Brankovic told poloff January 9 that he had been "impressed by Nikolic's campaign," calling him the "leader of political marketing" for his attempts to modulate the Radicals' image. Marko Blagojevic, a pollster for the Serbian NGO CeSID, told poloff on January 9 that the Radicals have "done a good job" of drawing large crowds and running a visible campaign with a softer campaign message than previous years. IRI representative David Bell told emboffs, January 9, that the Radicals aimed to pull non-SRS voters with this softer campaign, without alienating core supporters. Bell noted that the Radicals were making corruption, a top concern of Serbians, one of their key themes against Tadic, tempering their rhetoric about defending Kosovo -- on which they find little fight among the candidates. Bell said that poll and focus group participants see Nikolic as the most "honest, authentic" candidate -- by a large margin, lending credibility to his anti-corruption message. Nikolic's January 6 statement that war crime fugitives, including Ratko Mladic, "would not fear arrest" by Serbia if he were elected president, however, represented his efforts to keep the nationalist party base satisfied.

16. (SBU) The Radicals are drawing large crowds, and polls show their voters are the most committed. Ten thousand supporters attended the largest Nikolic rally of the campaign, in Novi Sad on January 5. (The sizeable crowd is especially notable since Novi Sad Mayor Maja Gojkovic did not support or attend the event.) The Radicals also held early rallies in central Serbia (in Kragujevac on December 24

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and Leskovac on December 29) which also drew large crowds, according to first-hand reports. The Radicals plan to hold their final rally on January 15 in Belgrade, and close their campaign in Kosovska Mitrovica on January 16. Brankovic said Radical supporters had "very strong voting discipline," suggesting they would vote in large numbers. Blagojevic said that according to CeSID's latest polls, 79% of Radical supporters, the highest of any party, were strongly committed to voting for Nikolic.

TADIC: CONFIDENT OR COMPLACENT?

17. (U) Though not as remarkable as the Radicals thus far, Tadic has waged an active, national campaign for support, and has held large rallies backed by high-budget advertising. Tadic opened his campaign with a large rally in Novi Sad on December 22, followed by trips to Kragujevac on December 27 and a planned rally in Nis on January 12. The DS will hold their final rally in Belgrade on January 16.

18. (SBU) The Democrats' campaign focuses on general themes rather than specific issues and steered clear of negative campaign tactics and messages. Billboards and advertisements feature a solemn, handsome Tadic with the motto, "For a Strong and Stable Serbia." Blagojevic told poloff the Democrats' approach was on "high politics," hoping voters respond to a sweeping message of preserving respect for Serbia's image in the world. IRI's David Bell told emboffs that the DS tested more aggressive anti-Nikolic advertisements in focus groups, linking a Radical victory with a return to the 90s, but that viewers strongly rejected these "scare tactics." According to Bell, voters thought Serbia had changed too much since the 90s to backslide.

19. (SBU) While Nikolic holds the edge on authenticity and anti-corruption credibility, poll respondents see Tadic as more effective at attracting foreign investment, projecting a positive

image of Serbia, ensuring Serbia's position in the world, and preserving stability -- issues that will influence how Serbians will vote. Bell said that campaign messages which are optimistic about what the DS can deliver -- European integration and more jobs -- resonated better with voters, but that the DS had not yet integrated such messages in their campaign. Brankovic agreed, telling poloff that Tadic needs to be "more convincing" in his ability to show the electorate that Serbia has a European future.

¶10. (SBU) Pollsters agree that the complacency of DS supporters is one of the major challenges for Tadic's reelection bid. Both Bell and Blagojevic called the DS "overconfident," and suggested that party members blithely expect that, as minor democratic candidates depart the field after the first vote, their supporters will turn out to elect Tadic in second round. Blagojevic said that his numbers indicated 50% of likely voters expected a Tadic victory, while only 34% expected Nikolic -- something which could boost Radical and dampen DS turnout. Blagojevic said that Tadic's strength was in his "higher ceiling" for votes than Nikolic: while the Radicals can not reasonably expect more than 1.5 million votes, the democratic bloc has 1.8 million eligible voters. Blagojevic and Brankovic's projections show Liberal Democrats (LDP) and G17 Plus voters will turn out in large numbers for Tadic in the second round. DSS support is, at this point, uncertain. Each pollster and several embassy contacts reported that the DS hopes that the EU will offer a Stabilization and Accession Agreement (SAA) on January 28, between election rounds, and give Tadic a major boost going into the February 3rd runoff.

SECOND TIER PARTIES KEEPING THEIR VOTERS ACTIVE

¶11. (SBU) Three other parliamentary parties are running candidates for president: the Liberal Democrats, New Serbia (NS), and the Socialists (SPS). Polls show the three with the same level of support, between 6-8% of likely voters. Blagojevic said that the three were running to remain visible and to keep their voters involved. Blagojevic expected LDP voters to support Tadic (73%) in the second round and 51% of Socialists planning to vote for Nikolic. Brankovic had similar projections. While they are not running a candidate, the G17 Plus has stayed in touch with its voters, sending out party mailings endorsing Tadic and urging its supporters to vote.

¶12. (U) LDP candidate Cedomir Jovanovic launched an ambitious campaign on December 21 in Belgrade, drawing 2,000 supporters. The LDP has two campaigns -- one with Jovanovic and one with other party officials and celebrity supporters -- which will cover all of Serbia until final rallies in Novi Sad (January 12), Nis (January 13), and Belgrade (January 15). NS candidate Velimir Ilic began his campaign last, but received the endorsements of Prime Minister Kostunica and key Orthodox Church officials. Ilic began his campaign with the

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visit of monastery Milesevo where Bishop Filaret blessed him. Ilic will host an Orthodox New Year celebration with a performance by popular turbo folk singer Ceca, on January 13, in his native Cacak in central Serbia. SPS candidate Milutin Mrkonjic visited Slobodan Milosevic's grave, during his campaign, and praised the dictator as a "human giant." Like Ilic, Mrkonjic visited the Milesevo monastery and received Bishop Filaret's blessing. The SPS is planning a Belgrade rally on January 15 and its closing convention in Kragujavac on January 17.

THIRD TIER PARTIES

¶13. (U) The goal of the final four candidates is to spotlight their parties' platforms. Istvan Pastor, from the Hungarian coalition, is focusing only on Vojvodina and hoping to attract some non-Hungarian minority voters. Milanka Karic, running in place of her exiled husband Bogoljub, is spending more of the Milosevic-era family fortune staging rallies around Serbia. Two parties -- Yugoslav Dobricanin's Reformists and Marijan Ristic's Popular Peasants, have no real campaigns and receive only government-mandated time on

state television.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) We expect that Tadic will win this election, but he faces real and considerable challenges. Events in or concerning Kosovo, support of coalition partners, and the effectiveness of the highly compressed election campaign period will influence Election Day results. Kostunica's ultimatums to the EU on Kosovo clash with Tadic's pro-Europe platform create dissonance for Kostunica's supporters (the Democratic Party of Serbia) that might keep them from the polls entirely. The Radicals are not a convincing alternative to the status quo, however unsatisfying, but Nikolic's softer, Seselj-free campaign is their most effective effort yet to do so. The embassy, through assistance programs to IRI, NDI, and others, will assist democratic parties to get out the vote, in a big way. End Comment.

BRUSH